Naming the Land: A Linguistic Exploration of Khasi Toponyms as Eco-Cultural Markers
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Abstract

Toponymy is a subfield within linguistics that examines the origins, meanings, and cultural significance of geographic identifiers. This paper investigates the ecological and cultural significance of Khasi toponyms, exploring how traditional place names encode essential environmental knowledge. By examining the meanings behind these names and their relationship to local ecological systems, this study highlights the role of toponyms as key markers of the Khasi people's deep connection to their environment. The research utilises qualitative methods to explore how place names are closely tied to cultural identity, environmental stewardship, and ecological practices. Findings reveal that Khasi toponyms serve not only as geographical markers but as repositories of ecological wisdom, offering insights into the landscapes, natural resources, and cultural beliefs of the Khasi community. Furthermore, the paper explores the ongoing threat to these toponyms caused by language shift, globalisation, and urbanisation, emphasising the urgent need for their documentation and revitalisation. The study contributes to the broader field of environmental linguistics, particularly in the context of indigenous languages and ecological knowledge.

Keywords: Toponyms, Environmental Linguistics, Khasi, Khasi toponyms, Ecological Knowledge

1. Introduction
1.1 Language and Nature
All societies and communities shared a deep connection with their natural surroundings—forests, rivers, mountains, and all the elements of nature. These environments were vital to their survival, providing food, medicines, materials for construction, raw materials for crafts, ritual items, musical instruments, and even agricultural tools. In addition, people's beliefs and spiritual practices were deeply intertwined with the land and water.

This bond that humans share with nature is often reflected in the language they speak. Central to this connection is the *naming system*, which provides insight into how different cultures perceive and interact with the environment. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis suggests that language shapes perception, and this is clearly evident in the way languages are influenced by ecological features such as landscapes, seasons, and the flora and fauna that surround a community. From the naming of places to the terminology used for animals, nature directly informs linguistic systems, shaping not only how people communicate but

also how they understand their world. Janice Pariat's poem about naming the world through orality beautifully encapsulates that,

> our names are old names
> Unwritten, unrecorded
> Wretched from stone, *mawngap, mawsynram, mawphlang*
> or coaxed from water, *umiam, umlyngka, umphyrnai*

1.2 Environmental Linguistics

In recent years, the field of environmental linguistics has gained significant attention, focusing on how language reflects and shapes human interaction with the natural environment. Environmental linguistics posits that language is not only a tool for communication but also an important vehicle for preserving and transmitting ecological knowledge. Indigenous languages, in particular, are rich repositories of such knowledge, as they often encode vital information about local ecosystems, climate patterns, and natural resources. In many indigenous communities, place names or toponyms play a crucial role in preserving this ecological knowledge.

1.3 Toponymy

The study of place names, or *Toponymy*, is a critical subfield within linguistics that examines the origins, meanings, and cultural significance of geographic identifiers. The term *Toponymy* is derived from the Greek word's *topos*, meaning 'place', and *onoma*, meaning 'name'. This field is a part of *Onomastics*, the broader linguistic discipline that focuses on the study of names, encompassing all types of nomenclature, including personal names, place names, and object names. A scholar specialising in this area is referred to as a toponymist. The word 'toponymy' was first introduced into the English language in 1876, as noted by the Oxford English Dictionary, and has since been widely adopted in academic discourse (Sarmah, 2017, p.1).

According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, Toponymy is defined as "the taxonomic study of place names based on etymological, historical, and geographical information." Place names, or toponyms, are linguistic units used to identify or denote a geographic locality. From a linguistic perspective, Toponymy categorises place names into two broad types: 'habitation names' and 'feature names'. 'Habitation names' refer to areas that are inhabited, such as villages, towns, or cities, and typically originate from the establishment of these localities. 'Feature names', however, refer to natural or physical features of the land and are further divided into Hydronyms (names related to water features), Oronyms (names related to relief features), and names associated with natural vegetation growth, such as meadows, glades, or groves (Bhattacharjee, 1987, p.33). In this paper, 'Features names' are the main area of study.

From a linguistic standpoint, place names often reflect not only the geographical and cultural features of a region but also the language and social structures of the people who named them. Place names are frequently derived from a variety of natural geographical features like hills, rivers, mountains, and ponds, revealing important linguistic patterns and regional influences. The linguistic process of naming is deeply intertwined with language, offering insights into the historical, cultural, and ecological context of the area. In this sense, place names serve as a linguistic record, preserving historical narratives when written records may be scarce or unavailable. This study of toponyms thus not only informs the field

of linguistics but also provides a broader understanding of how language reflects cultural and geographical identities, transcending dialects, regions, and time periods.

1.4 The Study Area

Talking of toponym, the term *Meghalaya* originates from Sanskrit, combining '*megha*' (cloud) and '*alaya*' (abode), aptly reflecting the region's frequent and dense cloud cover, particularly over its highland plateaus. The name was coined by the geographer S.P. Chatterjee in 1936. Bounded on the North and East by Assam and on the South and West by Bangladesh, Meghalaya is spread over an area of 22,429 Sq. Kilometer. Meghalaya became a full-fledged state on 21st January 1972, the 21st state of India. It is mainly the homeland of three main tribes, the Khasis, the Jaintias and the Garos. The Khasis and the Jaintias, usually clubbed together under the name 'Khasi' is an area of emphasis in this study.

Miri (2022) upholds that the etymology of "Khasi" remains a matter of contention. Some suggest that "kha" means "born of" and "si" refers to "an ancient mother." Some others suggest that the word "khasi" may have originated from (a) *cassia*, a particular bay leaf found in the Khasi Hills or (b) from *ghas* generally meaning grass or (c) from *kash, a special* grass found in the area.

The Khasi people, an indigenous group residing in the northeastern region of India, possess a unique linguistic and cultural heritage that is deeply intertwined with their natural surroundings. Khasi toponyms, in particular, offer valuable insights into the community's understanding of its environment, as many place names encode information about local ecosystems, flora, fauna, and geography. These toponyms are more than mere geographical labels; they serve as cultural markers that reflect the Khasi people's intimate relationship with the land and its resources.

The Khasi language, a Mon-Khmer member of the Austroasiatic language family, is spoken by over a million people in the state of Meghalaya. According to the language census 2011, there are 14,31,344 Khasi speakers, which accounts for 0.12% of the country's total population. Diffloth (2005) classified Khasi under the Khasi-Khmuic branch of the Austroasiatic language family, as shown in the following linguistic tree:
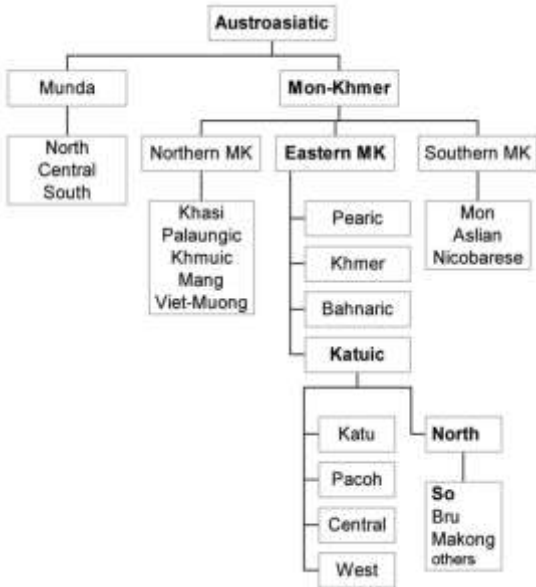

Figure: Austroasiatic Language Family (Diffloth 1976)

This paper seeks to explore the role of Khasi toponyms as eco-cultural markers and, henceforth, explore the traditional ecological knowledge embedded within them.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Environmental Linguistics

Environmental linguistics is an interdisciplinary field that examines the relationship between language and the environment. It explores how linguistic practices—such as naming, storytelling, and discourse—reflect ecological knowledge, environmental values, and perceptions of nature. The field has emerged from the recognition that language is not just a tool for communication but a fundamental part of how humans understand and relate to the world around them.

In his work on ecolinguistics, Arran Stibbe (2021) argues that language plays a crucial role in shaping environmental attitudes and behaviours. He highlights how linguistic structures and metaphors can influence our perception of nature, often reinforcing unsustainable or exploitative attitudes toward the environment. According to Stibbe, language can either perpetuate environmental harm or promote ecological sustainability, depending on how nature is conceptualised and represented through language.

Eugene Hunn (1996), a leading scholar in the field of ethnobiology, emphasises the importance of toponyms in preserving indigenous ecological knowledge. Hunn argues that place names are not simply arbitrary labels; they are embedded with rich ecological information that reflects the lived experiences of local communities. For example, in many indigenous languages, place names describe the physical features of the land, such as the presence of rivers, mountains, forests, or specific species of plants and animals. These names often serve as mnemonic devices that help people navigate their environment and pass down important ecological knowledge across generations.

Moreover, toponyms often encapsulate cultural and spiritual beliefs, linking the natural world with the community's worldview. This connection between language, culture, and ecology is particularly evident in the case of indigenous languages, where place names are deeply intertwined with local myths, legends, and traditional ecological practices. The loss of these place names, therefore, represents not only a linguistic loss but also a loss of cultural and ecological heritage.

2.2 Toponymy and Indigenous Knowledge

The practice of assigning names to both animate and inanimate objects has been an integral part of human civilization from its earliest stages. Naming geographical features began in ancient times and later became a key element in the creation stories of various religions and cultures (Choudhury, 2021). In the Western academic context, the formal study of Toponymy emerged in the eighteenth century, although references to place names can be traced back to ancient sacred texts. For example, the first recorded place name in the Bible is Eden, described in Genesis 2:8 as the garden planted by God, which is equated with Paradise (Kadmon, 2000, p.4). The concept of Onomastics, or the study of names, also appears in classical works like Homer's The Odyssey, as well as in the writings of Socrates and Plato (Sharma, 2017, p.7).

In modern times, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz is often credited with popularising the study of place names in the Western world, earning recognition as the *founder of Toponymy* (Choudhury, 2021). His work, along with others in Europe, laid the foundation for the academic discourse on place names. J.J. Eglig's contributions, in particular, have been highly

influential, and he is regarded as the "doyen of the study of English place names" (Phukan, 2001, p.7)

Toponymy, the study of place names, provides a valuable lens through which to examine the relationship between language and ecology. Place names, as linguistic markers of the environment, often encode detailed information about the geography, climate, and ecosystems of a particular region. Indigenous peoples, in particular, have a long tradition of using place names to describe the natural features of the land, as well as to convey important cultural and ecological knowledge.

According to Bernd Hennig (2013), toponyms serve as a type of "ecological map," providing insight into the way indigenous communities have historically interacted with their environment. In many cases, these names describe the specific characteristics of the land, such as the presence of fertile soil, the availability of water, or the types of vegetation found in a given area. For example, in the case of the Khasi, place names like Mawphlang (grassy stone) and Sohra (land of fruits) reflect the community's intimate knowledge of the land's natural features and resources.

Toponyms also carry cultural and spiritual significance, as they often refer to sacred sites, mythical places, or historical events. For instance, Law Lyngdoh, meaning "priestly forest," is a sacred grove in the Khasi Hills that has been preserved through religious customs. Such names not only reflect the ecological importance of the site but also its spiritual and cultural significance within the Khasi community.

This research will explore the toponyms of the Khasi-speaking regions, focusing on how these names reflect the people's socio-cultural and ecological context. By examining Khasi place names, this study aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on regional toponymic studies, particularly within the domain of indigenous languages. Through this investigation, the paper will enhance our understanding of how language, geography, and culture intertwine in shaping the identity of the Khasi people, offering a deeper appreciation of their unique cultural landscape. The preservation of indigenous toponyms is essential for maintaining the continuity of ecological and cultural knowledge.

2.3 Khasi Language and Sociolinguistic Context

The Khasi language is a member of the Austroasiatic language family and is primarily spoken by the Khasi people in the state of Meghalaya, India. The language is rich in metaphors, idioms, and expressions that reflect the Khasi community's deep connection to nature. However, the Khasi language is facing significant challenges due to language shift, particularly among younger generations who are increasingly adopting dominating languages like English and Hindi. This shift is not only affecting the use of the Khasi language but also contributing to the loss of traditional toponyms and, by extension, the ecological knowledge embedded in them.

The impact of language shift on Khasi toponyms is particularly pronounced in urban areas, where English and Hindi are often used in official contexts and everyday communication. In these areas, traditional Khasi place names are being replaced by English equivalents, and the younger generation is less familiar with the meanings and significance of these names. For example, 'Laitumkhrah' literally means 'on the way to the Umkhrah river', is one of the localities in Shillong city. Now, because of the influence of non-natives and visitors, the name of the place has been shortened to 'Laimu', a label devoid of meaning and context. Once whispered in the tongue of its roots, the name of this place has since been

reshaped by foreign winds—softened, twisted, and refashioned by those who journeyed here from distant shores. What was once a word laced with the breath of the ancestors now bears the cadence of a different tongue, unfamiliar yet firmly spoken.

3. Research Objectives:

i. To identify and analyse traditional Khasi place names and their meanings.

ii. To explore how Khasi toponyms reflect ecological, geographical, and cultural realities.

iii. To examine the role of Khasi toponyms in preserving and transmitting oral histories and local legends.

iv. To investigate how Khasi place names encode collective memory and ancestral knowledge.

v. To understand the socio-cultural significance of toponyms as markers of identity, belonging, and indigenous worldviews.

4. Methodology

Research Design: This study adopts a qualitative approach with a descriptive design to analyse the ecological significance of Khasi toponyms. Data are collected through secondary sources and are analysed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the meanings and cultural relevance of Khasi place names. Primary data are also collected, but only to a minimal extent.

Data Collection: Secondary sources such as ethnographic studies, historical accounts, and published works on Khasi were reviewed. These sources provided context and examples of Khasi place names and their cultural and ecological significance. A significant portion of the secondary data for this study was obtained from publicly available audiovisual content produced by *DD Meghalaya Official*, a verified YouTube channel operated by Doordarshan Kendra Shillong. The channel features a range of documentary and cultural programming, including the playlist titled *A Day in the Village*, which provided valuable ethnographic insight into rural life, traditions, and community practices in Meghalaya. These videos served as a supplementary source for understanding local customs and everyday experiences, especially in areas where access to written documentation was limited.

Data Analysis: The collected data was analysed thematically, categorising the toponyms based on their ecological and cultural features. The analysis focused on identifying patterns in the way place names reflect environmental features such as forests, rivers, and sacred sites.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Overview of Khasi Toponyms

Khasi toponyms offer a unique window into the ecological knowledge of the Khasi people. These names often describe the physical features of the landscape, such as rivers, mountains, forests, and caves. The relationship between the Khasi language and the land is deeply reflected in the structure and meaning of place names. These toponyms reveal an acute awareness of the land and its components, linking geographical features with ecological significance.

Toponyms in the Khasi community are often structured to reflect the intimate connection between humans and nature. For instance, many places are named after natural resources like rivers and stones, which are essential for the community's survival. Additionally, Khasi toponyms also carry social, cultural, and historical dimensions, encapsulating the rich

traditions, mythologies, and spiritual beliefs of the Khasi people. The deep relationship between the language and the environment is evident in these place names, which serve as both ecological markers and cultural signifiers.

5.2 Toponyms Related to Stone (*Maw*)

In Khasi, the word for stone is 'maw' (moo[1]). In the Khasi culture, stones are not merely physical objects but sacred markers of ancestry, memory and ritual. This reverence is reflected in the toponyms - many of which begin with "maw", signifying the cultural weight these stones carry. Below are selected toponyms that exemplify this naming convention:

> (i) *Mawphlang* - 'phlang' in Khasi is 'grass'. Here, the term refers to a stone covered with grass, possibly alluding to the landscape's features.
>
> (ii) *Mawlynnong* - 'lynnong' in the local dialect refers to 'cavity'. This place is named after the rocks that are hollowed by rainwater.
>
> (iii) *Mawblei* - 'blei' in Khasi is 'God'. The stone of God is believed to exist in this place.
>
> (iv) *Mawlai* - 'lai' in Khasi is 'three'. This location marks the third mile milestone from the Secretariat building of the state of Meghalaya.
>
> (v) *Mawsynram* - The name of the place is derived from the two Khasi words, 'maw' and 'synram' meaning 'washed down', reflecting the incessant rain that shaped the landscape. Notably, Mawsynram is one of the rainiest places on the planet.
>
> (vi) *Moolamylliang* - The place derives its name from a woman named 'Lamylliang'. Local narratives suggest that the Lamylliang clan traces its origin through this woman.
>
> (vii) *Laitmawsiang* - In Khasi, 'lait' means 'end of the slope' and 'mawsiang' refers to large boulders.

Beyond the above examples, there are numerous other Khasi places whose name bear the prefix 'Maw-' including: Mawlyndum, Mawtneng, Mawshynrut, Mookroh, Mawah, Mawsiangbah, Mawlynsep, Mawbeh, Mawphrew, Mawdoh, Mawkliaw, Mawlynrei and a hundreds many others.

5.3 Toponyms Related to Water (*Um* or *Wah*)

In the Khasi worldview, water is not only essential for survival but also revered as a life-giving force that sustains both the natural world and human communities. This cultural reverence for water is deeply rooted in oral traditions, rituals, and ecological practices. It is also vividly expressed in toponyms—the names given to places—which serve as linguistic markers of the environment and the people's interaction with it.

Khasi toponyms related to water often contain the morpheme *um* (or *am*[2]) which directly translates to *water* or the morpheme *wah*, which translates to *river or stream.* These simple yet powerful root words appear in a wide range of place names, each reflecting a unique relationship with specific water features. For example:

> (i) *Umden* - 'den' in a local dialect refers to a dam. This toponym signifies a water storage area created by damming a river or stream.

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[1] 'moo' is a word for stone in Pnar, a variety of Khasi.

[2] 'am' is the word for water in War Jaiñtia, a variety of Khasi.

(ii) *Umphyrnai* - 'phyrnai' in Khasi literally translates to 'twinkle' or 'shimmer'. This toponym, therefore, denotes a location situated near a water body characterized by a sparkling or glistening appearance.

(iii) *Amkoi* - The name *Amkoi* originates from a local legend involving a river pool and a girl named *Koi*. According to the tale, Koi accidentally dropped her ring into the pool, and while trying to retrieve it, she tragically drowned. In remembrance of the incident, the local families later filled the pool with earth and named the place Amkoi.

(iv) *Pyrdiwah* - In the native tongue, 'pyrdi' means 'in the middle of'. Thus this toponym describes a location geographically situated in the middle of a river.

(v) *Lakroh* - This place takes its name directly after a nearby river.

(vi) *Umjong* - The river 'Umjong' ('jong' in the native tongue means 'black'; thus 'black river') directly inspired the name of this place.

Additional places in the Khasi and Jaiñtia Hills that derive their names from rivers include Umladkhur, Umru, Umkon, Umwang, Umtngam, Wahlakhiat, Amlympiang, Umkrem and hundreds of others.

5.4 Toponyms Related to Other Vegetation

A significant category of Khasi toponyms pertains to forests, trees, and other vegetation. These names represent an important aspect of the Khasi people's daily lives and cultural identity. For instance:

(i) *Kshaid* - In Khasi, 'kshaid' literally means 'waterfall'. The toponym derives its name from the numerous waterfalls found in the surrounding area.

(ii) *Nongriat* - 'nong' represents a phonological reduction of the word *shnong*, which translates to 'village' in Khasi; and 'riat' means a cliff or a ridge. The toponym signifies a location enclosed by surrounding ridges.

(iii) *Mairang* - In the native tongue, 'mai' is a word for 'more' and 'rang' means 'a bit drier'. The toponym reflects the region's relatively dry or arid climatic conditions.

(iv) *Lumpyngngad* - 'lum' in Khasi means 'mountain or hill' and 'pyngngad' means 'pleasant or serene'.This place name reflects a location situated on a hill characterized by clean and invigorating air.

(v) *Khliehriat* - In the local language, *khlieh* denotes 'head' and *riat* means 'cliff', indicating that the toponym refers to a place located at the top of a cliff.

(vi) *Patharkhmah* - In the local vernacular, 'pathar' refers to a paddy field; and 'khmah' denotes the original agricultural settler of a particular area.

In the same vein, many other places derive their names through similar associations.

5.5 Toponyms with Mythological Meanings

In addition to their ecological functions, Khasi toponyms are imbued with layers of mythological connotations. They encapsulate the history, traditions, and spiritual beliefs of the community, often drawing from local folklore, legends, and ancestral narratives. In this way, Khasi place names serve as a bridge between the physical and metaphysical, preserving both the tangible and intangible aspects of the community's cultural identity. Some examples are:

(i) *Nongkhlieng* - 'khlieng' is a khasi word for an eagle. Local legend holds that the place was named in honor of its warriors, who fought with the swiftness and fierceness of eagles against their enemies.

(ii) *Pomshutia* - In the local vernacular, the word 'pom' means 'to be hacked by a daos'. The village, according to local folklore, takes its name from an event in which a deceitful man was slain in the field, and the settlement was later established at the same site.

(iii) *Nongsynrieh* - *Nong* arises from a phonological simplification of *shnong*, which is the Khasi word for 'village'. As per local tradition, the village derives its name from a woman named Sensynrih, who is said to have healed the villagers afflicted by a deadly leprosy plague.

5.6 Toponyms derived from or closely associated with clan names

In the Khasi and Jaintia socio-political landscape, toponyms are not merely geographical markers but are deeply embedded in kinship, clan identity and ancestral claims to land. Many villages and localities bear the names of dominant or founding clans, revealing the linguistic encoding of social organisation. Following are examples of places named after clans or with names similar to clan names:

(i) *Khonglah*
(ii) *Lamin*
(iii) *Nongtalang*, which literally means the dwelling place of the Talang clans, the first settler of the land.
(iv) *Kongwang*
(v) *Rymbai*
(vi) *Sutnga*
(vii) *Sumer*

This paper acknowledges the absence of any explanation concerning the origins of these names, particularly whether the place is named after a clan or vice versa. However, a significant number of place names in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills bear strong resemblance to clan names.

Regardless of uncertainties, it can be concluded that clan-based toponyms are more than semantic labels; they are living records of indigenous relationships to land, identity and community. These toponyms serve as linguistic testimonies to the presence and influence of particular clans in those areas. Moreover, the preservation of these names across generations demonstrates how language functions as a cultural repository, encoding the collective memory of clan histories, migration and ecological relationships.

6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Khasi toponyms are far more than geographic labels—they are eco-cultural markers that reflect the intimate connection between language, culture, and ecology. The meanings embedded in Khasi place names reveal deep ecological knowledge, with names describing rivers, forests, mountains, and sacred sites that have shaped the lives of the Khasi people for generations. These toponyms not only provide valuable insights into local ecosystems but also serve as cultural markers that preserve the Khasi community's identity and traditions.

Khasi toponyms are not merely geographical identifiers but serve as vessels of cultural memory and indigenous knowledge. In addition to reflecting ecological and spatial realities,

these place names are often rooted in folklore and oral traditions, revealing the community's deep connection to its ancestral past. The recurring similarities between clan names and place names further suggest a complex interplay between kinship, territory, and identity, where naming becomes a way of preserving historical narratives and social structures. These patterns highlight the significance of Khasi toponyms as a vital lens through which one can interpret both the tangible and intangible heritage of the Khasi people.

Further research can explore how the replacement of Khasi place names with English equivalents threatens the preservation of both the language and the ecological knowledge they carry. As globalization and environmental shifts persist, the disappearance of these toponyms signifies a broader loss of cultural and ecological heritage. Future studies should focus on strategies for documenting and revitalizing indigenous place names, emphasizing their role in conservation, cultural preservation, and environmental education. This research could also investigate the potential of toponymic revitalization as a bridge between traditional ecological knowledge and modern environmental practices.

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